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Kommentare (0)

The turning fortunes of Romania's far right. The rise and fall of Greater Romania Party



This is the sixth article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

by Mihnea-Simion Stoica

As everywhere else in Eastern Europe, ever since the fall of the communist regime, Romania's political system has experienced dramatic changes from one electoral cycle to another, starting off with what was considered to be an **inflation of political parties** at the beginning of the 1990's and arriving today at what seems to approximate a two-party system, with the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) on the left and the National Liberal Party (PNL) on the right side of the political spectrum. However, the fog surrounding the ideological identities of virtually all Romanian political parties has only intensified in time, **leaving the party system in flux** and creating the idea that there are no significant differences between the major political players. As was the case of many other countries, this situation has generated the (at least partial) success of a radical anti-establishment discourse. However, unlike other European countries, the far right in Romania did not benefit by the financial crisis.

Throughout the entire post-communist period, the Greater Romania Party (hereinafter, PRM) founded and led with an iron fist by Corneliu Vadim Tudor – its late leader who famously declared “**the party is me**” – generated most of the ethnonationalist rhetoric on the Romanian political scene. His radical stances on many issues, amongst which those against the Hungarian ethnic minority shaped his highly controversial figure. He repeatedly declared that Transylvania is being “**forcefully maghyarized**” by the ethnic Hungarians who live there and reportedly said that Romania could only be lead with a machine gun, praising the idea of **public executions on stadiums**. He sometimes claimed his party to be ideologically rooted in the left, having declared his admiration for the former Romanian communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. It is therefore no surprise that he was labeled by the media and by his political opponents as populist, extremist, xenophobe, authoritarian and, above all, a threat to Romania's democracy.

In explaining the evolution of the country's post-communist far right – invariably related to the development of PRM – there are four important moments in the recent history of Romania that should be looked at more closely: firstly, the presidential elections of 2000; secondly, the electoral results of the 2008 general elections; thirdly, the EU elections of 2009; and finally the post-2014 political realities. They represent more than just electoral victories or failures; they are instances of a tumultuous evolution of the electorate since the romanticism of the years immediately after the fall of communism until today's rough electoral pragmatism.

A close call: the presidential elections of 2000

The creation of PRM is surrounded by

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many conspiracy theories, some of which revolve around the idea that the party was artificially created by establishment politicians who couldn't use too strong of a nationalist rhetoric within their own parties. Thinking PRM would always remain a rather insignificant political force, few realized its true potential. The rising popularity of PRM's charismatic leader as a major anti-establishment figure radically differentiated the party from all others, who were mostly



Tudor während der Wahlkampagne 2014

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led by older politicians. His rhetoric was mainly against corruption, which was (and still is) perceived by the Romanian electorate as one of the major **drawbacks** for the country's development. The radical style of this new politician became an element of pride for his supporters. Asked why he voted for Vadim Tudor, one of his young voters put it bluntly: **"I appreciate his extremism"**. Acting as a whistleblower proved to be quite an efficient strategy for the leader of PRM, who was voted because he apparently had "got the nerve" to pick on the establishment or because he was the promoter of "an aggressive political style". The unprecedented and quite unexpected support for Vadim Tudor managed to propel him in the second round of the 2000 presidential elections, which he eventually lost, given the cordon sanitaire¹ created by all other parties that declared their support for his counter-candidate, Ion Iliescu. Even so, PRM gathered enough votes to become the second largest party in Romanian Parliament with 20.25 per cent.

The fading fortunes of PRM

The outbreak of the global financial crisis around 2008 acted as a breath of fresh air for most far right parties in Europe. Greater Romania Party was expected to experience a fate similar to the ones of Front National, Partij voor de Vrijheid, Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs etc., all of which regained the popular support they seemed to have been constantly losing in the previous years. However, this was not the case in Romania. The 2008 parliamentary elections brought about a political reality that not long ago would have been unconceivable: PRM didn't manage to win even one constituency nation-wide. Vadim Tudor accused the elections of **fraud**, as the total defeat of his party was a bitter reality he would have never expected and – as reality showed later on – did not know how to manage. The former champion of the anti-establishment discourse seemed to have been abandoned by his former staunch supporters, who now turned towards politicians who they considered to represent more credible voices on the Romanian political scene, with roughly similarly strong anti-corruption messages, less xenophobia and – most importantly – with higher chances of winning an election. Having lost so many elections since its creation, PRM seemed to have fallen victim to the inexorable laws of political Darwinism. Other **explanations** for the fading fortunes of PRM were related to the softening rhetoric of Vadim Tudor, who after the 2000 elections publicly declared that he ceased his opposition to Romania joining NATO and the EU, and admitted he was wrong when denying the existence of the Holocaust. These, together with his attempt (which eventually failed) to affiliate PRM to the European People's Party took his image too close to the "establishment", thus making his messages look unauthentic.

Back in the game: PRM goes to Brussels

The 2009 elections for the European Parliament represented a moment of

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unexpected comeback for *Greater Romania*, who has been constantly losing members – and as a consequence financial support, ever since its (what seemed to be) total defeat in 2008. Shortly before the EU elections, Vadim Tudor had even declared he would sell his car and some very valuable books from his private library just to gather enough money to campaign, showing that it became very difficult for PRM to make ends meet. The major event that helped revitalizing the party was determined not by the communication strategies of PRM, but by what happened to its political competitor. George Becali, leader of *The New Generation Party (PNG-CD)* – a smaller populist party – has been placed under **arrest** just a few days before the electoral campaign². Despite the fact that Becali's popularity was surging due to his victimization (against what was labeled as an “abusive measure” of the state against him), polls showed that his party was not strong enough to pass the five per cent needed to enter the European Parliament – similar to the situation of PRM, which was also just below the threshold. Understanding the political opportunity of adding the numbers and the chance for extensive media coverage due to the arrest of Becali, Vadim Tudor included his competitor's name on the list of PRM for the EU elections, thus forging an indirect alliance with PNG-CD and redirecting the sympathy for Becali towards his own party. This is how, from a non-player on the Romanian political arena, PRM came back into the attention of the public opinion by gathering ten per cent of the popular vote and sending three MEP's to Brussels, amongst which Vadim Tudor and George Becali³.

What's left of Romania's far right?

Throughout the last two years, PRM has developed the characteristics of a politically deceased organization. Today, nothing resembles anymore the (quite) successful party that it used to be during the 1990's and the 2000's. Its very weak (or rather lack of) local/grassroots organizations have dramatically decreased its visibility. After failing to win any seats in the 2012 national elections and the 2014 EU elections, and especially after the passing away of its leader in September 2015, PRM is now totally absent from the political arena. This can have various consequences. On the one hand, related to the developments on the far right: several smaller parties are now trying to fill in the space that was left empty by the succumbing of PRM. Their rhetoric is more violent than the one of *Greater Romania*, but they have so far been incapable of gathering even the least political support. Then there are implications related to the populist discourse: based on the principle of “communicating vessels”, this strategy did not disappear together with PRM, but has flown towards the bigger, mainstream parties, who sometimes gladly make use of it. And maybe one last important aspect is related to how much the Hungarian party UDMR will be affected by the disappearance of PRM. Having lost its main political enemy, is this small ethnic party going to face “an aimless activity”? Despite various opinions, there are no serious reasons to believe that the faithful Hungarian electorate will severely defect. Moreover, (amongst many other elements) the law which reverses the national electoral system to proportional representation from a first-past-the-post one, might also help UDMR to remain (although with a marginal influence) in the national political arena.

The beginning of the 2010's meant the dismantling of what one could call *the party-organized Romanian far right*. The social phenomena in which its evolution was embedded disappeared, but the main infrastructure for various forms of manifestation – this time maybe outside of the logic of party politics – has remained or, given the refugee crisis, unfortunately might have even evolved. It remains to be seen how long until the outbreak of a new political movement that successfully picks up the issues of the far right.

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1. Cinpoes, Radu (2015): ‚Righting it up‘. An interplay-based model for analyzing extreme right dynamics in Romania. In: Michael Minkenberg (Hg.): Transforming the transformation? The East European radical right in the political process. London: Routledge (Routledge studies in extremism and democracy), p. 288. [↗](#)
2. The arrest of George Becali was not related to any political activities. [↗](#)
3. The important score of PRM was also determined by the low electoral turnout for the European Parliament elections in Romania (less than 30 per cent in 2009) – as actually has happened all over Europe. [↗](#)

 Tags: **George Becali, Greater Romania Party, PRM, Romania, Vadim Tudor**

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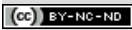
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